I RACCONTI DI DRACULA

Skull Time Movie Journal

HALLOWEEN SPECIAL 2025

The concept is a simple one:

During the month of October each year, good sense and grown up responsibilities are thrown aside, and an attempt is made to watch at least one horror film per day, taking notes which are initially posted on the forums at rockshockpop.com.

This zine covers the events of October 2025.

(Aforementioned notes have subsequently been fact-checked and worked up into somewhat coherent reviews, and some editorial license has been applied applied to liven up the boring / over-familiar bits, but screening dates and overall number of movies watched remains accurate.)

01/10/25 (Weds)

#1
Barn of the Naked Dead
(Alan Rudolph, USA, 1973)

AKA 'Terror Circus'

Post-hippie, pre-Texas Chainsaw desert freak vibes aplenty in this Nevada-set drive-in oddity, starring the great Andrew Prine as the psychotic son of a circus ringmaster who kidnaps women and keeps them chained up in his derelict barn, wherein he attempts to train them like circus animals (!?)

The presentation of this outrageously misogynistic premise is clearly preposterous (eg, the inmates of the titular barn seem have kept their hair and make-up in remarkably good shape during the months they've spent imprisoned in abject squalor)... but perhaps that's just as well, given how unpleasant a more realistic portrayal of such a repulsive scenario could have been.

Give thanks then that the gore effects are both infrequent and laughably inept, whilst shoddily rendered ADR dialogue further diminishes any sense of verisimilitude, and frequent cutaways to a slobby Vegas talent agent searching for his missing dancers provide a calming - indeed, extraordinarily tedious - counter-point to all the barn-based misery.

On the plus side, the film is extremely well photographed, utilises a lot of great (albeit oft inappropriate) library music, and is directed in a slow, rather dream-like manner, perhaps reflective of director Alan Rudolph's subsequent transition to writing/directing more 'serious' mainstream fare.

And, as usual, Prine is brilliant too. (I always feel he's very much the '70s equivalent of Wings Hauser, in terms of his willingness to deliver 110% commitment to scuzzy, below-the-radar movies.)

Contrary to the way things usually play out in '70s exploitation, it's notable that Prine's character never really molests or tortures his victims, who (in spite of the movie's title) remain clothed throughout - perhaps reflecting either a lack of enthusiasm for staging such content on the part of the filmmakers, or else a refusal to co-operate on the part of the female cast members.

As much of a relief as this may be in ethical terms though, it does leaves the movie feeling a bit toothless on the horror front. But, things do eventually get a bit hairy in the final reel, once Prine's dad - who has been transformed into a ravenous monster through proximity to the Nevada H-bomb tests(!) - escapes from his padlocked shack and begins perpetrating some 'I Drink your Blood' / 'Mad Doctor of Blood Island'-style carnage, belatedly giving the drive-in punters what they paid for.

As other commentators have noted, the lackadaisical attitude of Prine's female victims - who calmly submit to being chained up and imprisoned by a maniac, largely failing to fight back to take advantage of assorted opportunities to escape - does not exactly help sell 'Barn of the Naked Dead' to a 21st century audience. To be honest though, I feel like this is probably more symptomatic of the general zoned out, sun-baked / sand-blasted atmosphere of the whole affair than a conscious expression of misogyny on the part of the filmmakers. (I mean, it's not like the male characters exactly have much get-up-and-go about them either.)

Not a good movie by any stretch of the imagination then, but an appealingly weird one, and... what can I say, I just love horror films made in this particular time and place. Worth it for the vibes alone.

02/10/25 (Thurs)

#2
Die, Monster, Die!
(Daniel Haller, UK/USA, 1965)

AKA 'Monster of Terror'

Essentially structured like a bizarro world re-make of Corman's 1960 '..House of Usher', AIP's sort-of Lovecraft adaptation doesn't really 'work' in any manner that a good movie conventionally should. But, it's at least quite strange, which is enough to convince me to give it a second look (or a third, or a fourth.)

It's always been a murky, misty looking movie, but the BFI blu-ray is still a huge step up from my fuzzy old DVD copy, allowing for a greater appreciation of Haller & co's way-out production design. In fact, this re-visit served to remind me just how many memorable elements this film actually has in the 'plus' column.

Excellent views of British horror's home-from-home Oakley Court (both exteriors and the more rarely seen interiors); a great performance from Freda Jackson, hidden behind heavy drapes as the bed-ridden mother character; a scene-stealing cameo from the immortal Patrick Magee as a drunken doctor; the gnarly Slayer-album-cover decor in Karloff's radioactive basement… and then there's Karloff himself, trooper to the last, exuding menace big style in his best moments here as he wraps his lips around some choice horror movie dialogue ("chains… for devils").

Admittedly, the decision to turn his character into some kind of extraordinary, silver-skinned robo-man during the finale is sorely misguided, but, it's at least *unexpected* - as is the film's overall best moment, when we get a brief

glimpse of the genuinely freak-ish baby cthulhu-spawn puppets in Boris's greenhouse. A real weirdo horror jaw-dropper, right there.

Despite all this though, the film is still less than the sum of its parts, diminished by a meandering, cliché-ridden script, and by a chronic lack of any real antagonist - not to mention a handful of grating transatlantic anachronisms guaranteed to annoy any British person within earshot.

Above all though, Nick Adams and Suzan Farmer make for a truly hopeless pair of "youthful protagonist" characters, the latter decked out like a beaming, pink-sweatered Gidget inexplicably birthed from the blighted home counties gloom, whilst the ill-fated Adams sneers and grimaces his way through the picture as if auditioning for the role of a hood in a Mike Hammer movie, frequently generating unintentional laughs with his aggressive, over-emphasised line deliveries. No wonder Boris and the suspicious villagers all want him to fuck off, he's horrible.

So where does all that leave this damned thing, on the cosmic scales of critical movie judgement? Beats me. Regardless, I'm sure I'll probably need to keep watching it every now and then until the day I expire, god help me.

<u>03/10/25 (Fri)</u>

#3
Slaxx
(Elza Kephart, Canada, 2021)

This is a Canadian made-for-Shudder movie in which a possessed pair of jeans stalks over-night workers in a Uniqlo-style chain clothing outlet.

I had not previously watched it, because frankly that description sounds terrible, but a few positive notes from trusted sources inspired me to give it a shot, and I'm very glad I did.

The satire of corporate hypocrisy / cult-ish brand loyalty is initially extremely broad and cartoon-ish, but takes on a more pointed and effective anti-capitalist focus as the movie goes on - and especially once the tragic origin of the killer jeans becomes apparent.

Horror-wise, the "trapped overnight in a time-locked mall" set-up lends the movie a bit of a 'Chopping Mall' feel. Sadly, cramped sets and minimal production values don't allow much room for the kind of stalk n' slash set-pieces one might ideally wish for, but there are certainly some fun

gore gags, and the marauding green-screened trousers are adorably ridiculous, all leading up a satisfyingly nasty, '70s style downer ending.

Oh, and also, the 77 minute run-time proved VERY WELCOME on a sleepy Friday night.

I wonder if, in thirty years time, horror fans all be busy buying long-awaited box sets of these Shudder movies? I mean, they're not all masterpieces by any means, but, based on the handful I watch each October, they tend to be imaginative and enjoyable low budget efforts which consistently punch well above their weight.

Mannequin Killer: 'Crystal Eyes'

#4
Crystal Eyes ['Mirada de Crystal']
(Ezequiel Endelman & Leandro Montejano, Argentina, 2017)

Not merely a tribute to the Italian *giallo* in general, this DIY Argentinian feature is specifically a homage to the sub-category of highly stylised, DePalma-influenced '80s fashion world *gialli*, as exemplified by films like Carlo Vanzina's 'Nothing Underneath' (1985). And honestly, it makes me so happy just to live in a world in which such a niche thing can not only exist, but actually find an audience.

To some extent, the texture and feel of this kind of shot-on-DV affair will always look a bit too cheap and not-sufficiently-filmic to suit its aesthetic purpose, but, leaving aside that unavoidable caveat, 'Crystal Eyes' admirably takes care of business, realising some great visuals and brilliantly staged murder sequences. It boasts some frankly astounding, obsessively detailed production design, and is all conducted with a general spirit of Big Fun, revelling in the sheer, OTT absurdity of the micro sub-genre it is paying tribute to, neither getting too precious about it nor descending into outright mockery.

The killer mannequin looks really cool. The lo-fi miniature Suspiria house in which much of the action takes place is absolutely *delightful*. And there's a great sequence with a pair of Rollin-esque identical twins playing out near-identical variations of the same murder, which is really an all-timer.

Who knew that Buenos Aires of all places was home a gaggle of giallo-freaks with the necessary chutzpah to pull something like this off, and to do it so successfully? May the dark gods bless them.

04/10/25 (Sat)

Day off. Needed to go and listen to some organ music in a church - so, at least *somewhat* gothic horror-y.

05/10/25 (Sun)

#5
Doctor X
(Michael Curtiz, USA, 1932)

Pre-empting tomorrow's full moon (via the presence of the 'Full Moon Murderer'), time to check in with the recent, absolutely glorious UCLA restoration of quite possibly the most way-out, bat-shit crazy pre-code Hollywood horror of them all. I've written about it before, I'll probably write about it again, and in all cases, avoiding hyperbole will prove challenge, because I love this film beyond all reason.

From the moment we crawl through the green-tinged, fog-shrouded New York dock set to the Mott Street Morgue, there to witness Lionel Atwill looking up from 'neath the sheet concealing the corpse of the latest full moon murder victim, announcing, "this is cannibalism gentlemen, no doubt about it!", we know we're in for a wild ride. And indeed, across the next seventy minutes or so, the madness barely lets up.

And, yes, as every critic across the past century has noted, Lee Tracy's motor-mouth comic relief reporter shtick *does* take up way too much screen-time, but c'mon - the good stuff here is almost too good to believe.

From Atwill's jaw-droppingly suspicious line-up of unhinged scientific colleagues, to the uniquely lurid, gangrenous use of two-strip Technicolor, to Anton Grot's astounding, expressionistic sets and some of the most exquisitely strange / beautiful mad science gear ever created, to the fact that *nothing in the script makes any sense whatsoever*, in the best possible way… well, I could go on.

Above all though - that *syyyyynthetic fleeeesh* finale. Holy cow. It's always seemed astoundingly ahead of its time, but, thanks to the clarity of the new restoration, it looks as if it could have been pulled straight from a print of a some gloopy, new wavo '80s body horror. If you showed me this sequence in isolation and said, "this was shot in 1931", I would flat-out not believe you.

Indeed, 'Doctor X' is the crazy, ranting granddad of every weirdo horror movie which has followed in its wake over the subsequent 94 years, and it still leaves me speechless every time.

06/10/25 (Mon)

Full moon werewolf double bill!

#6
Cry of The Werewolf
(Henry Levin, USA, 1944)

Seemingly a misguided attempt by Columbia's b-unit to simultaneously cash-in on the recent successes of both Universal's 'The Wolfman' and RKO's 'Cat People', this misbegotten load of hoo-hah finds studio stalwart Nina Foch top-billed as … (deep breath)… the sultry, lycanthropic 'princess' of a 'tribe' of Transylvanian 'gypsies', who breaks into a New Orleans 'occult museum' housed in what used to be her family home, wherein her mother leapt through an open window some decades beforehand, after allegedly transforming into a wolf and mauling her husband to death. (This event is re-enacted multiple times each day via the museum's tour schedule.)

The reason for Nina's renewed interest in the museum is that the prof who runs it (played by Fritz Leiber Sr, father of the celebrated SF author) has discovered the dark secrets of her wolf-worshipping tribe, and is about to publish them in the form of a biography of her mother, thus necessitating that the nefarious Romany types must destroy his manuscript at all costs. (News of the professor's manuscript is conveyed to Foch incidentally via the museum's club-footed janitor, who is not only in cahoots with the gypsies, but even retains a hidden wolf-shrine in the museum's basement, accessible via the obligatory secret passage behind the fireplace.)

Phew. How come, despite being barely an hour long, these '40s programmers always manage to cram in such horrendously convoluted plotlines? Sometimes I think they did it deliberately, to punish reviewers working to a word count.

Well in this case, they needn't have bothered - just watching the damned thing is bad enough. I'm aware that my synopsis above probably makes the whole business sound quite enjoyable, but alas - by any conventional yardstick, this is an absolute stinker. Flatly directed, torturously over-scripted and full of grating, mismatched performances - all of these sins are theoretically forgivable, but the kicker is that no one involved in this production seems to have had any ambition beyond just delivering an hours-worth of derivative, vaguely genre-appropriate footage before clocking off & calling it a day.

To the collective disappointment of eight decades-worth of viewers lured in by the cool title, there is no actual werewolf on-screen here at any point - no make up effects, no transformation scene, nothing. Instead, a variety of decidedly non-threatening doggies are substituted for Foch when required, allowing their cute little paws and looming shadows to stalk the other cast members about the place, in a series of laughably inept attempts to imitate the famed 'Lewton Walk'.

For all this though, I still couldn't find it in my heart to really hate the wretched thing. There are some atmospheric moments here and there, the opening scenes depicting a tour of the 'occult museum' are quite fun ("ladies and gentlemen, it's time to proceed to the Voodoo Room.."), and the story-line is just so damned kooky and oddly constructed that 63 minutes sailed by fairly painlessly.

#7
Curse of the Devil [El Retorno de Walpurgis]
(Carlos Aured, Spain, 1973)

Depending on how you choose to count them, this is either the fourth or fifth film in which beloved Spanish horror icon Paul Naschy played the ill-fated, lycanthropic Polish nobleman Waldemar Daninsky. And, to be honest, it's never been one of favourite entries in the series, but, it's also the top-billed title on a new three-disc set of Spanish horrors I recently picked up, so hey-ho, here we go again.

The trouble with this one I think, is that Naschy was trying to adopt a more 'serious' tone, attempting to distinguish the film from the crack-brained monster rallies and psychedelic freak-outs which had characterised his *oeuvre* up to this point. So, it's sombre, it's fairly slow… but, unlike the excellent run of self-directed films he went on to produce later in the decade, it's not yet a strong enough effort to really justify such an approach. As a result, it just spends much of its run-time feeling a bit dull.

If we adjust our expectations accordingly however, this can still be enjoyed on its own terms as a pretty solid slice of blood-thirsty Euro-gothic, and it certainly has its moments - not least thanks to the presence of no less than three spirtied female co-stars for Paul to work his seductive magic upon, some very weird, vaguely folklore-derived occult business involving Spanish horror regular Maria Silva portraying Elizabeth Bathory, and the presence of one of the funkiest lookin', most acrobatic werewolves ever to grace the screen. (So, I mean, if that doesn't constitute a recommendation, what would, right?)

Incredible UK double-bill poster for 'Curse of the Devil'. Imagine seeing this outside yr local Odeon!

07/10/25 (Tues)

Still wolfin' it up.

#8
Wolf Cop
(Lowell Dean, Canada, 2014)

Unless I've got my wires crossed (which is entirely possible), I think this thing was all the rage on Youtube way-back-when, prompting several people to recommend I watch it because, "you'd love this kind of thing".

So naturally, I didn't bother, but here we are a decade or so later, and I'm hiding out upstairs tonight, fulfilling my October movie duties with a laptop and headphones because the fuckin' council - instead of doing something useful like caring for the elderly or buying library books or whatever - have decided to use my hard-earned tax dollars to pull a night shift resurfacing the already adequately surfaced road directly outside my flat's front windows, thus lending our living room the ambience of a scene from Stephen King's 'Maximum Overdrive', soundtracked by a cacophony of screeching metal and heat-compressed gravel eruptions in place of AC/DC.

So, clearly something loud, stupid and streaming was required, preferably involving werewolves - and 'Wolf Cop' took the call.

I wish I could say "the title is the plot" and leave it at that, but in fact the script here spends quite a lot of its time getting caught up in the weeds of various back stories, side characters and world-building. This certainly helps add plenty of local colour the film's shit-kicker small town Canadian setting, and generally speaking I feel writer/director/producer/etc Lowell Dean gets the balance between pulpy/sincere comic book pastiche and low-brow comedic yucks about right, only occasionally veering into all-out obnoxiousness.

The practical effects and the central transformation scene are excellent, and and the werewolf sex scene (in tribute to 'The Howling'?) proves a bit of an eye-opener too. I particularly love the idea that our title character (Leo Fafard as - sigh - *Lou Garou*) actually sheds his skin each time he goes into wolf-mode, with the matted wolf-flesh just sort of emerging from beneath his human outer shell.

A novel approach, which works well and looks really cool, and a nice, chuggin' soundtrack from Saskatoon-based downer metal/out-rock band Shooting Guns helps too. (Check out their 'Street Rock' and 'Spectral Laundromat' albums at some point when not driving or operating heavy machinery - highest possible recommendation.)

Despite all this though, 'Wolf Cop' is eventually suckers simply by its excess of plotting / exposition. The movie is at its best during the scenes which stick closest to the 'Robo Cop' blueprint, letting our hero roar around town in his pimped up wolf-mobile, wreaking havoc upon the local criminal element… but there's just not enough of that sort of thing, to be honest.

Instead, we get tons of back story / personal motivation for everyone, alongside some stoner conspiracy theory / RPG-style mythos about the town being controlled (for some reason?) by a cabal of shape-shifting lizard people. Which is all… fine, but it's not really what I came to 'Wolf Cop' for, y'know?

A decent effort, anyway. I appreciate the chutzpah and ambition which clearly went into putting it all together - but I'm not sure I'll be trying to tell anyone they "love this kind of thing" anytime soon.

08/10/25 (Weds)

#9
Lukisan Berlumur Darah ['The Blood-Stained Painting']
(Torro Margens, Indonesia, 1988)

This Indonesian horror begins with a flashback to the Dutch colonial era, during which a pair of nasty burglars break into the well-appointed home of a bearded Dutchman as he lays in bed with his Indonesian wife.

The violent melee which ensues plunges us straight into the rougher end of Indo-exploitation, as the Dutchman is bloodily killed, and his wife is raped by the intruders, all whilst her jilted Indonesian ex-boyfriend (who is also knocking about for some reason) looks on helplessly. With a sudden burst of rage, the wife manages to stab both of her attackers to death, after which she and her ex are left with the task of disposing of the bodies and keeping the whole thing secret (which is deemed to be politically expedient for reasons which I confess escaped me.)

Meanwhile, the camera zooms in on a slashed and (yes) blood-stained portrait of the lady of the house, and remains there entirely static for several minutes, in what I assume was supposed to be the opening credits sequence, although, oddly, no credits seem to have been added to the print of the film I'm watching.

Cut to the present day, and a young married couple are moving into the now dilapidated, cobweb-strewn mansion. Of course, they immediately find the blood-stained portrait in a dusty corner, the wife takes a shine to it…. cue haunted house time!

The night after the newlyweds move in, a storm fells the huge Banyan tree which dominated their front yard. I assume their new neighbourhood must also be suffering from a severe unemployment problem, because when they awaken the next morning, half of the local male populace seem to be standing around outside, sombrely debating how best to deal with the felled tree - and they all seem happy to hang around all day and help out too, which is nice of therm.

During this process, the fellas discover a skeleton buried beneath the tree, and !ZAP! goes a post-production laser-beam, straight into the eyes of the young wife! CRASH goes the tray of coffee she was obediently carrying out to the hard-working menfolk, and, at this point, I feared we might be in for seventy minutes or so of re-heated 'Poltergeist' / 'Amityville' tropes. But, I should of course have had faith in the Indonesian film industry's ability to always put a unique, culturally specific spin on any given genre scenario.

Admittedly, this one lacks the WTF highlights or wild special effects for which better-known examples of Indo-horror have become (in)famous in the west, but it's a sincere, compelling and fairly well-made film nonetheless, boasting a genuinely uncanny atmosphere and a number of bloody and well-executed set-pieces, as sudden, un-signposted flashbacks cause the movie's past and present time periods to blur together in disorientating fashion. It moves at a decent pace too, has few dead spots, and isn't as melodramatic as you might fear in view of the plot-line. (Oh, and no comic relief either, thank god.)

A solid watch then, made even more enjoyable by the husband character's perpetually thwarted desire to be served coffee, and the weirdly inconsistent macho behaviour which results. (Kind of a recurring motif for haunted house movie husbands that, isn't it? Not to mention for Indonesian movie heroes in general, so I guess we get a double dose of confused machismo to navigate here.)

09/10/25 (Thurs)

#10
Another Wolf Cop
(Lowell Dean, Canada, 2016)

Another night battling the steamrollers outside, which means it's time for… Another Wolf Cop!

First off - I love the title. It reminds me of the awkwardly translated English title applied to the sequel to the 1964 West German krimi film 'The Ringer' - 'Again The Ringer!'.

Because I'm pedantic about these things, it does kind of spoil the effect in this case to discover that we're actually dealing with the *same* Wolf Cop again. But it's ok - I grew to like him during the first one, so nice to see him back.

Word on the street suggested that this is the better of the the two 'Wolf Cap' films, and yes, it is indeed a far more efficient delivery mechanism for FUN. Better action scenes, more cool effects and gore, more rockin' music, more broadly likeable characters, and…. it actually manages to be even more Canadian then the first one, which is quite an achievement.

In fact, insofar as I'm able to make such a claim whilst lacking any first hand exposure to Canuck culture, I think 'Another Wolf Cop' may be the single most Canadian thing I've seen in my life - as exemplified by the moment during the finale in which a beloved TV personality unknown to the rest of the planet plays the national anthem on a Casio keyboard prior to an ice hockey game, to the patriotic delight of a crowd of furry-hatted, beer-swilling fans.

Even more-so than the first film, there's a 'South Park'-esque feel to the use of the small town setting to deliver broad social criticism (y'know, unchecked consumerism is bad, collusion between corporate and government interests is also bad - that sort of thing), whilst the combination of gross-out humour, audacious practical effects and a cynical/satirical edge also lends the movie a bit of a Frank Hennenlotter feel in places. No bad thing, and once again, kudos to Dean & co for maintaining that fine balance without allowing things to tip over into purely obnoxious territory.

On this side of the pond, I think we'd comfortably classify this kind of thing as "post-pub viewing", so it feels appropriate that it ends with the heart-warming sight of the surviving characters chugging beers together in a car park. Definitely a "don't watch sober" proposition, but if you've had the requisite skinful, hit the play button with confidence - fun will be delivered.

10/10/25 (Fri)

#11
The Vampires' Night Orgy [La Orgía Nocturna de los Vampiros]
(Leon Klimovsky, Spain, 1973)

My history with this film goes all the way back to when I picked up a copy on video in my youth, and used to proudly display it in-between tapes of films by Godard, Tarkovsky etc, just to try to get a rise out of people.

At that point, as a Euro-horror novice, I recall considering it a pretty middling, formulaic affair - just sort of ok, really. Reviewing it for a column I was doing for a friend's zine at the time, my conclusion was "plenty of vampires; no orgy; not much night" - which remains broadly accurate.

But, either my standards have slipped during the intervening years, or else I've gained a greater appreciation for the craftsmanship behind these films, because returning to 'The Vampires' Night Orgy' in 2025, it struck me as a distinctly superior effort. Well paced, well shot, good cast (Jack Taylor, Helga Liné) and overall quite engaging - a thoroughly decent little horror movie.

And, corny as the "hapless bus-load of mismatched characters trapped in the vampire village" plot-line may seem, when you get down to it, the movie is not really even all that formulaic either, at least in terms of its original context. I mean, when we think of vampires in early '70s European vampire movies, we're generally still looking at the romantic/gothic, aristocratic model blood-suckers, right? How many other films were there from this era in which the vampires are ravenous, zombie-like beasts who lurk in remote locales, hunting people down in packs in a bloody, survival thriller type manner? (The only one which immediately springs to mind is Giorgio Ferroni's excellent 'Night of the Devils' (1972).)

In fact, despite boasting a quintessential Erotic Castle Movie title, '..Orgy' is far more on a post-Romero, '70s New Horror tip for much of its run-time, front-loading suspense over sex, concentrating on cynical, world-weary characters in dilapidated locations, and incorporating some genuinely nasty stuff (cannibalism and dismemberment) and disturbing images (eg, a vampirised mother dragging the body of her dead child around) along the way.

Of course, there are some obvious weaknesses (the plot is absurd on multiple levels, the 'Brigadoon'-esque epilogue is boring and unnecessary, many of the music cues are wildly inappropriate), but such missteps are to be expected in the context of a time-constrained, low budget production, and for the most part, this rocks. Though not quite in the top tier of Spanish horror, it's definitely a strong second division contender.

#12
Alison's Birthday
(Ian Coughlan, Australia, 1981)

Based on what little I knew about this film going in, I suppose I was expecting some sort of "'Home and Away' with Satanists" kind of affair… and to a certain extent, I suppose that's what I got.

Indeed, Australian film culture has produced so few full-blooded supernatural horror films that the notion of an ancient Celtic blood cult thriving in a quiet Sydney suburb not unlike those seen in our favourite soap operas of yesteryear - complete with their own imported stone circle(!) - feels inherently surreal.

A DAVID HANNAY PRODUCTION "ALISON'S BIRTHDAY"
ALISON'S Birthday
Whilst taking part in a seance with two school friends, Alison is warned by her dead father to escape from an evil surrounding her family. This she must do before her nineteenth birthday.
With her boyfriend, Pete, she visits her Aunt and Uncle to celebrate this birthday and soon finds her father's prophetic warning coming terrifyingly true.
Awakened by nightmares involving cult followers of the demon goddess Mirme, she is soon under the hypnotic influence of her wicked relatives, who, in a terrifying celebration of black magic, attempt to transpose Alison into Mirme's horrifying image.
Summoning their demonic powers from the evil cenotaph, the devil cult descend into the depths of depravity, where hell meets the goddess of terror, in her quest for immortality... Is there time for Alison to be saved by Pete!
Approx. Running Time: 95 minutes.
18
HORROR CLASSICS
HORROR CLASSICS
ALISON'S Birthday
18
SATAN's only gift is death....
18
ALISON'S Birthday
WITH JOANNE SAMUEL as Alison and starring LOU BROWN
BUNNEY BROOKE - JOHN BLUTHAL - VINCENT BALL
Written & Directed by IAN COUGHLAN

Essentially, what we've got here is a straightforward "members of an ancient pagan cult raise their orphaned niece as a future blood sacrifice" type yarn, reminiscent of Norman J. Warren's 'Satan's Slave' (1975). Nothing too original, but it's confidently and imaginatively executed, with solid performances, some genuinely strange moments and -- thanks in part to the incongruity of the setting, as outlined above -- a whole lot of charm.

Tonally, Ian Coughlan's film exists in an odd liminal zone where, on the one hand, it's entirely unapologetic about being a horror movie, going all-out on the occult / supernatural stuff at every opportunity, with no pretentions whatsoever toward ambiguity or Lewton-esque "subtlety". But, on the other hand, it also includes no violence, sex, or other 'exploitation' content whatsoever. A curious combination to be sure, especially in view of the marketplace for horror as it existed in 1981.

This absence of more, ahem, 'adult orientated' material lends the film a bit of a fantasy flavour at times (in genre terms, I mean), and perhaps accounts for the fact it remained an obscurity amongst horror fans for so long, prior to its restoration and re-release in the 2020s.

Could it have been made for TV? That would explain a lot - not least the fact that the HD transfer looks fuzzed out and grainy, like blown up 16mm footage or something. If that is the case though, it would still seem to have originated in some parallel universe in which '80s TV movies were fast-paced and fun, and were allowed to convey subversive messages to teenagers about the wisdom of staying out all night with boy/girlfriends, not trusting grown ups or authority figures, and running away from your family because they're evil and lie to you... so who knows?

Well, people who have carried out the slightest bit of research into this film. They probably know. I'm sure five minutes of online searching would help resolve this question, but I wouldn't want to shatter the illusion that I'm going purely on "first impressions" here. More power though to Australian TV execs of the 1980s if they were commissioning this sort of thing.

(Though the film keeps things fairly light, declining to address the obvious parallel between (fictional) Satanic indoctrination and (factual) familial abuse, if we were to force that reading upon it then the solutions it offers its long-suffering title character seem both progressive and helpful.)

Also, the period detail and the music is all as lovely as you'd you'd expect. All in all, a nice surprise, and a somewhat unique entry in an over-crowded corner of the genre; well worth tracking down.

11/10/25 (Sat)

Time for an oddball, shot-in-English Italian Dracula movie double bill!

#13
Blood For Dracula
(Paul Morrissey, Italy/USA, 1974)

A HD re-visit for by far my favourite of the two "Andy Warhol" horror movies shot in Italy by Paul Morrissey during the early '70s, and a film I love more each time I return to it.

Whilst the outrageous camp of 'Flesh for Frankenstein' remains a good laugh, Morrissey seems - quite inexplicably - to have progressed considerably as a filmmaker in the brief interim between the two productions, returning here with a movie which feels far more tonally consistent and comfortable in its own skin than its predecessor. By which I mean, this one feels like an *actual* European horror film, and a very good one at that, rather than the work of a cynical New Yorker smirking at the funny accents and goofing on the genre clichés.

Despite being saddled with a plot-line seemingly devised for a low brow sex comedy (helpfully summarised by the Italian release title, which translates as "Dracula Seeks a Virgin's Blood… and He is Dying of Thirst!!!"), 'Blood For Dracula' presents a fairly unique variation on the vampire mythos, and manages by turns to be funny, sexy, grotesque, perverse, beautiful, smart, and even quite moving in places, balancing black humour with a pervasive atmosphere of doomed, entropic melancholy.

Of course, Morrissey's esteemed collaborators probably deserve a fair amount of credit for the film's success (Luigi Kuveiller behind the camera, effects by Carlo Rambaldi, and a fine score from Claudio Gizzi, to name but a few), but even more credit likely belongs to the unlikely band of international oddballs who comprise the cast. Space prohibits me from breaking down their individual contributions here (check IMDB/Wikipedia for details), but suffice to say, as mis-matched as their acting styles may be, everyone on screen here is strange, memorable, and charismatic.

This is even more of an achievement in view of Morrissey's decision to shoot with live sound (a rarity in the Italian industry), leaving many of the non-English speaking actors struggling to deliver their dialogue phonetically, whilst, at the other end of the scale, Joe Dallesandro's failure to disguise his broad New York accent adds a surreal aspect to his portrayal of the virile communist gardener whose penchant for deflowering his employer's daughters leads him to inadvertently become Dracula's arch-nemesis.

Above all else though, the late, great Udo Kier must of course be singled out for praise. Dialling it down slightly from his mincing fascist Baron in '..Frankenstein', Kier's malnourished, hypochondriac Count Dracula is a truly pitiful creation, and reports that Kier starved himself to the point of infirmity for the role are certainly borne out by his frighteningly cadaverous, almost translucent appearance.

Barely keeping it together during moments in which he is required to present himself in public or interact with other human beings, the Count instead channels his limited energies into the nauseous bathroom freak-outs he is forced to undertake in private, ridding his system of tainted blood. Horrifyingly convincing, these scenes prefigure the similarly intense transformations Kier later put himself through in Walerian Borowczyk's remarkable 'Docteur Jekyll et les Femmes' (1981) (a film so tonally similar to Morrissey's 'Flesh..' and 'Blood..' that it could almost be considered an unofficial third entry in the trilogy… but that's a topic for another day.)

The fact that Kier manages to carry off this disconcerting business without undercutting the comedy, even providing one of cinema's funniest ever line deliveries (if you've seen the film, you know the one) whilst in the throes of his sickness, is little short of remarkable - as indeed is the film as a whole. Transcending expectations to emerge as a genuine classic, I believe this deserves a place not just on any self-respecting list of 'best horror-comedies', but of 'best vampire films' overall.

#14
Dracula 3D
(Dario Argento, Italy, 2012)

And from the sublime to, well…. how best to approach this?

Whilst visiting Tokyo circa 2013-14, I happened to pick up a flyer for a screening of this film, printed up to resemble a $100 bill with Argento's face on it. The accompanying text said something to the effect that attendees would be awarded $100 for watching it through to the end - such was the scale of the universal ridicule the movie attracted upon release.

Over a decade later, having never taken them up on that challenge, I found myself thinking, well…. how bad can it possibly be? I mean, I'd heard all the outrage about the CG praying mantis and the fuck-awful effects and so on, but… even back when Argento was making good films, the sheer absurdity of his work was always a big part of its appeal, so... this is bound to at least be a *laugh*, right..?

Wrong. No laughs. Without resorting to hyperbole, I think I can fairly say that, however bad you've heard Argento's Dracula is, it's worse.

We probably should have bailed out as soon as the opening credits appeared, looking like something a fantasy wargamer knocked up on their PC during a lunch-break in 1998, accompanied by an overbearing, sub-Elfman digi-orchestral score (Simonetti, WTF?). But, foolishly, we ploughed on regardless.

With the exception of some fairly elaborate exterior sets and the occasional use of Argento's trademark crane/dolly shots, production values here are otherwsie about on the level of a goth/medieval-themed porn parody, or a series cut-scenes from a '90s video game, the script scarcely rises above the level of gibberish, and it's all *so boring*.

It just goes *on and on*, as a bunch of characters who bear only the most tangential relationship to anyone in Stoker's novel repetitiously chew their way through reams of pointless expositional dialogue, whilst Asia yet again resorts to getting her tits out in a doomed attempt to retain the interest of the assumed hetero-male audience for her dad's films.

Why has Lucy Westenra been re-named "Lucy Kisslinger"? Why does everything now take place in a quasi-medieval town named "Passburg"? Why does the guy identified as "Renfield" not do any of the things usually associated with Renfield? Who knows, who cares.

Vampire movie scholars with more patience than I may wish to acknowledge pointless nods to both the Universal and Hammer incarnations of Dracula… but then, just when you think it can't get any worse, Argento spends the last fifteen minutes or so trying to re-enact the romantic "Dracula's ex-wife" sub-plot form the fucking Coppola Dracula! Because that's what the fans all came to see, right?! Fucking unbelievable.

Kudos then to the late Rutger Hauer for actually delivering something approaching a performance in the Van Helsing role, but meanwhile, the unquiet spirits of Zander Vorkov and Lon Chaney Jr can finally rest easy, because I think we can safely say that Thomas Kretschmann is, objectively, the worst screen Dracula in history, frowning his way through the role with all the charisma, menace and sexual potency of a disgruntled call centre manager.

I mean, when you're making a movie like this and your Count Dracula just reads on-screen as… *some guy*, you'd think that would be a fairly important issue to try to address? But no. I suppose the thinking was that everyone would be so wowed when he transforms into a poorly rendered CG owl, it wouldn't even matter.

Even with expectations set as low as they could be, I was frankly stunned by the awful-ness on display here. Having finally reached the closing credits after a few strategic naps, the only positive I could take away from this experience was to reflect that, if this is the level of work Dario was happy to sign his name to circa 2012, the fact that he managed to get it together to actually make a half-decent film again in the shape of 2022's 'Dark Glasses' is truly remarkable.

12/10/25 (Sun)

#15
5 Tombe per un Medium ['Terror Creatures From The Grave']
(Massimo Pupillo, Italy, 1965)

It's amazing to think that, once Severin release Riccardo Freda's 'The Ghost' (1963) on blu-ray in 2026, all of the gothic horror films Barbara Steele made in Italy between 1960 and 1966 will have been restored and reissued in flawless HD (unless I've forgotten any).

Such a 180 reversal from the situation which prevailed not-so-very-long-ago, when I was first getting into these films, and needed to track them down via the blurry, barely watchable tape-sourced PD versions found on 100-movie DVD sets, or as low res .avi files excavated from the depths of the internet.

Beyond Steele's Bava and Freda films, there really didn't seem to be that much information out there about on her more obscure efforts, or even much interest in them from most quarters. Which, together with the antiquated aesthetic of the films themselves, made the experience of discovering them feel like unearthing something genuinely ancient and forgotten.

And, in some cases, I can't help but feel that removing all those layers of distance and deterioration has served to make these films a little *less* eerie, a bit more mundane. Returning to them with a clearer, more critical frame of mind, thinking about narrative deficiencies, slow pacing and uneven acting, before clicking through to the extras and hearing surviving cast members nattering on about working on the set, and certain high-falutin' critics (you know the ones) grinding endlessly through analyses of each film's generic context and flimsy literary antecedents… I don't mean to sound ungrateful, but… it's just not the same, somehow.

But, even if Barbara's charms don't beguile me quite as much as they did when staring back at me through 50 years-worth of accumulated analogue/digital murk, it's still been ages since I last checked in with this particular one (and I don't think I've EVER seen the Italian release version, as far as I recall), and… it still holds up fairly well, I think?

Despite spending the majority of the run-time getting bogged down in a dispiritingly tedious mystery/revenge story, Pupillo & co still deliver a steady flow of memorable images, eccentric ideas and odd, dream-like touches (glass

Barbara Steele and Riccardo Garrone, 'Terror Creatures From The Grave'

cases full of disembodied hands, lore concerning "plague spreaders", creaking invisible cartwheels, owls stuffed into car engines etc.), allowing it to rise above expected genre cliché, and keeping us interested until the malign forces of the supernatural finally get down to business in the final reel. Steele's death scene in particular is a real keeper, ending on a beautiful / grotesque tableau which probably counts as one of her finest screen moments.

13/10/25 (Mon)

#16
El Vampiro
(Fernando Méndez, Mexico, 1957)

Although I'm a big fan of vintage Mexican gothic horror, I had put off watching this one for a while, simply because, well… how can I best put it? Much as I love these films, they do have a tendency to feel a bit stuffy and formal at times, and in particular, these early "global vampire" movies can sometimes prove disappointing viewing, sometimes just boiling down to variations on, "hey, it's Dracula, but today he's in [insert city/nation here], can you believe it?!", without adding anything much of interest to those us who did not live in [insert city/nation here] 60+ years ago.

As such, I'd rather feared that, despite its historical importance as the inaugural film in Mexico's gothic horror boom (pre-dating the premiere of Hammer's 'Dracula' by a matter of months), 'El Vampiro' might well end up being the kind of affair in which many formally-attired, morally unimpeachable rich people are solemnly introduced to each other at drinks receptions, making awkward, expositional small talk as we patiently await the arrival of Senor El Vampiro, after which they all spend the remaining run-time solemnly discussing what to do about him.

But, I needn't have worried. I should have had more faith in the fine artistry of actor/producer Abel Salazar's Cinematográfica ABSA studio. Because as it turns out, 'El Vampiro' is absolutely fantastic, steering away from the trad "vampire as atavistic threat invading a boring, uptight world" formula and instead taking a more rewarding fork off the fog-shrouded cross-roads, staying true to the spirit of Dreyer and Whale (and anticipating the work of Mario Bava) by ushering us into a world entirely under the sway of supernatural weirdness from the outset.

No boring cocktail parties here, and the only grand hacienda we get to visit is a dilapidated, cursed one in a blighted, remote locale, long shunned by the general populace and inhabited by the benighted remnants of a fading, vampire-haunted bloodline…. so in other words, no normie stuff getting in the way of our horror, and precious little respite from the rich, uniquely morbid atmosphere of dread which '50s Mexican horror films do so well.

The storyline may be boilerplate stuff, with nothing remotely as crazy as the later ABSA horrors going on, but the photography and framing of the action is Bava-level superb, whilst the sets (subsequently re-used in 'The Black Pit of Dr M' ('59), 'The Curse of The Crying Woman' ('63) and goodness knows what else) looks amazing, dressed

with nearly as much fog as 'The Fog', and more cobwebs than 'The Giant Spider Invasion'.

There's a massive, barn-storming James Bernard-esque score pummelling us at all times, and, with the exception of mild comic relief from the aforementioned Abel Salazar (The Brianiac himself!) as the audience-surrogate male lead, the cast play it serious as cancer. Spanish-born actor Germán Robles brings a sense of artfully malign aristocratic grandeur to our resident vampire, whilst Carmen Montejo is equally as impressive as his female counterpart - suave, sepulchral and convincingly otherworldly.

You see, Dario?! This is how you do it! Only very slightly marred by the inclusion of some regrettable rubber bats on strings, 'El Vampiro' is an under-sung masterpiece of old school gothic horror cinema which… deserves to be sung a bit more frequently, I suppose.

14/10/25 (Tues)

#17
Something Evil
(Steven Spielberg, USA [TV], 1972)

What's that, you say? An early Spielberg TV movie about a haunted house, starring The Night Stalker himself, Darren McGavin? Count me in!

So. Kolcha -- I mean, uh, McGavin -- ups sticks from NYC to move into a picture postcard American Gothic farmstead with his much younger wife (Sandy Dennis) and their two munchkins. Of course, they learn too late that the property's previous owner died under mysterious circumstances, there are New England style 'hexes' (or "protective pentangles", as the script has it) painted all over the barn, sounds of phantom babies crying in the night, etc etc.

But, busy ad exec McGavin is having none of it, and insists on leaving the increasingly neurotic Dennis all alone with the kids in their spooky gaff whilst he pulls over-nighters back in the city, so… I think we all see where this going.

The script here (by that renowned literary titan Robert Clouse, strangely enough) is pretty routine fare, but none-more-early '70s in its thematic concerns, tapping into that very particular, white flight-era "urbanites try to reconnect with the land and lose their minds in the process" vibe (cf: 'Dark August', 'Let's Scare Jessica to Death', 'A Name For Evil', etc), with some additional "neglected housewife dabbles with the occult" jive (ala Romero's 'Season of the Witch') thrown in for good measure.

If all this feels a bit undercooked and short on originality in Clouse's hands though, it is at least superbly directed - very much as you'd expect, I suppose. Say what you like about

It was a happy home . . .
Until the devil had his way.
Steven Spielberg's masterpeice of lurking suspense. A family must face a sinister force inhabiting their new farm house.
Sandy Dennis Darren McGavin Ralph Bellamy
Something Evil
Monday's 3:00 Movie
7

Spielberg's later career and I'll probably agree, but even at this early juncture, his technical chops were impeccable. Endeavouring to make every shot a good one, he displays a particular flair here for imaginative / suspenseful camera movements and effective visual storytelling, hugely raising the bar on a project that could easily have been a total snooze-fest in lesser hands.

The earlier, more bucolic scenes flow beautifully, and, though the story's horror content remains extremely mild, once the forces of evil get to work later on, Spielberg goes full 'Duel' on our asses, using montage-like fast-cutting, wild handheld work and disorientating shifts in perspective to create some unnerving and powerful sequences. What can you say - the kid's got talent.

He's aided greatly by Dennis's performance, which starts off twitchy and builds up to an almost 'Repulsion'-like level of derangement, delivering all the intensity missing from the script.

Sadly though, our man McGavin rather lets the side down, cruising through his 'harried husband' role as if taking an extended holiday from bothering to act, meaning there's no grandstanding Kolchak-esque ranting to enjoy here, tragically.

Not exactly a classic then, but an engaging watch, and an

essential one for viewers with an interest in Spielberg, TV movies, '70s haunted house vibes, or any combination thereof.

15/10/25 (Weds)

#18
Sh! The Octopus
(William C. McGann, USA, 1937)

I know zilch about the history of pre-war American comedy, so apologies if I've got the wrong end of the stick here, but… if those Bob Hope / Paulette Goddard ghost-chasing pictures *['The Cat & The Canary' (1939), 'The Ghost Breakers' (1940)]* can be seen to represent the 'mainstream' of pre-war U.S. humour as applied to cinematic spook-shows, could it be that what we're looking at here is more like, say, the 1930s equivalent of anarchic / edgy alternative comedy...?

Or, has 'Sh! The Octopus' simply fallen victim to the process whereby, as comedy ages and recedes from living memory, jokes lose their context and become increasingly surreal and incomprehensible, generating new, WTF-level interest from younger generations as a result..?

Either way, this one-of-a-kind Warners quickie remains a decidedly peculiar business, featuring characters and scenarios which seem to tumble forth on an almost stream of consciousness basis, disconnected from any kind of internal logic.

So - an artist who appears to have purchased a lighthouse from the government turns up to his new property, only to find it guarded by a paranoid head-case named Captain Hook, whom, he is informed, flies into a homicidal rage whenever he hears the ticking of a clock (but not a watch - those are fine). Also, the lighthouse has no stairs, these having been removed, confining everyone to the ground floor and preventing access to the tower, where the light miraculously continues to shine, despite having been decommissioned.

Meanwhile, two fast-talking Warner Bros comedy cops are stuck in their patrol car in the midst of a torrential downpour. They seem to have conflated the metaphorical "OCTOPUS OF CRIME" which their Commissioner talks about combatting in the newspapers with a *literal* octopus of crime, whom they appear determined to track down and apprehend.

Their hopes of achieving this unlikely feat are bolstered when they rescue a distressed young woman, who informs them that 'The Octopus' has been tormenting her missing step-father, on account of his having invented an 'Iridium Ray', which it (The Octopus, that is) intends to steal.

Soon, a traditional Old Dark House scenario ensues, as all of these characters plus a whole bunch more for luck (including Elspeth Dudgeon from yer actual 'The Old Dark House' (1931)) convene on the cramped lighthouse set, wherein a blood-dripping corpse has been discovered hanging from the rafters. Rather less traditionally though, the tentacles of The Octopus (or at least, AN octopus) regularly burst through unattended doors or windows to menace and throttle the occupants. Oh, and also, The Octopus has a submarine, apparently..?

Why is all this happening? What does it all mean? Beats me, but the sheer weirdness of the whole affair, combined with exhausting, mile-a-minute gag-blasting banter from our leading cop duo certainly generates a escalating sense of manic / absurdist amusement - which was presumably the intention.

It's certainly a lot funnier than, say, 'The Boogie Man Will Get You' from the following decade (which is probably my closest point of comparison), and with moody, Universal-style photography, frequent rubber tentacle attacks and an extraordinarily impressive single-shot monster transformation effect during the finale (perhaps employing the same technique used by Mario Bava to achieve a remarkable 'live aging' effect in 1957's 'I Vampiri'?), it's also at least as much of a "horror movie" as anything else released in 1937.

All-in-all then, still a pretty good time for oddballs and malcontents nearly 90 years down the pike, and easily as good as that Eggers guy's lighthouse movie.

16/10/25 (Thurs)

#19
Satan's Blade
(L. Scott Castillo Jr, 1982)

What better way to spend a time-constrained Thursday night than with a small can of lager, a small bag of pretzels, and a minor league '80s slasher?

And honestly, for a zero budget regional effort made by people who never troubled the film industry again, this one isn't at all bad.

Oddly, it starts off with a sequence which feels more like something out of a '60s 'roughie' sexploitation film, as a pair of female bank robbers pull off a heist, gratuitously murdering two women in the process, before they retire to a remote ski resort cabin, exchange absurd dialogue, attempt to take a bath, and fail as a result of getting bloodily murdered whilst in varying states of undress.

After this, we lurch a few days into the future and switch into a more familiar slasher mode for an extended "getting to know our characters" segment, as a pair of couples rock up at the resort and end up agreeing to rent the cabin in

which the aforementioned murders occurred. (Which has not been sealed off by the cops as a crime scene, because….? Oh, never mind.)

Acting and pacing are highly uneven and the plot is riddled with absurdities, but such is to be expected. It retained my interest anyway. The beautiful snow-bound locations probably helped.

Then, once the killer eventually gets to work, he really goes for it - no messing about. The entire cast is disposed of in about ten or fifteen minutes of screen-time. Gore effects are strictly of the smeary tomato ketchup variety, but the violence here has an unsavoury, fetishistic quality to it; poorly staged and scuzzy as fuck, but also sadistic and kind of kinky, like something out of a Michael Findlay movie.

There's no real attempt to create any tension or suspense, and no sense of the victims trying to fight back - just the grim spectacle of panicked and unprepared people floundering around and getting slaughtered. It's really quite unpleasant.

There is a supernatural back story, but it is vague and poorly delineated, whilst the initial crime / bank heist narrative never connects with it or really goes anywhere. But, what does it matter? At the end of the day, all you can really ask of production like this is for it to have a "vibe" - and boy, this thing has one in spades.

17/10/25 (Fri)

#20
Blood & Black Lace [6 Donne Per L'Assassino]
(Mario Bava, Italy, 1964)

If you've read this zine up to this point, you will have noticed that I have a tendency to incessantly reference Mario Bava whenever the opportunity arises - a natural result of my status as an unapologetic Bava fanboy, As such, I rarely miss a chance to revisit one of his many masterpieces during October, and this year it's 'Blood & Black Lace', which I've recently bought yet again in yet another upgraded transfer.

So, it looks amazing, obviously. But then, every version of this film I've owned has looked amazing - a natural result of it being simply one of the most beautiful horror films ever made, and almost certainly the most beautiful film ever made about women getting slaughtered for no terribly compelling reason.

Beyond that, a full review is probably surplus to requirements, but suffice to say - on the off-chance that you're thinking about making a horror film (or indeed a film about women getting senselessly slaughtered), and are wondering what it should look like - this is what it should look like. Thank you.

#21
Sleepaway Camp
(Robert Hiltzik, USA, 1983)

This, on the other hand, is definitely not one of the most beautiful horror films ever made.

In fact, it's extremely ugly throughout, with the exception of the remarkable variety of T-shirts on display, which could haunt a retro-fashion enthusiast's dreams for weeks after viewing.

At first, this one is fronting so much like a 'Friday The 13th' rip-off that they even seem to have used the same summer camp location, but the first sign that something is a bit 'off' here arrives as soon as the kids attending said camp start piling off buses, and we realise that, in contrast to the 30-year-old teenagers of slasher movie tradition, most of them are played by *actual children*.

This immediately telegraphs a dilemma for the filmmakers, given that - thankfully - films centred around actual 13-year-olds getting murdered have never been either marketable or culturally acceptable, so… clearly things are going to need to take a slightly different direction here…? And boy, do they ever.

Despite the fact that numerous characters (older camp staff members, 20-something ringers, etc) do eventually get the chop in a series of grotesquely ridiculous ways, 'Sleepaway Camp' never really *feels* like a horror movie. Devoid of tension, atmosphere, taste or style, it's more…. well, I don't know what it is really.

Some kind of esoteric '80s youth-cult black comedy? A post-modern commentary on the aesthetics of crass, Middle American banality? A shock exposé of the squalid living conditions and rampant safe-guarding issues found in the USA's so-called "summer camps"? You tell me.

Frequently blurring the line between sincere indie/genre filmmaking and self-parody, the filmmakers often give the impression that they're sniggering wildly to themselves behind the camera, whilst being careful not to let their cast members in on the joke. It's all a bit awkward, and not terribly enjoyable to sit through, for the most part.

Nonetheless, there's an absolute ton of stuff for the brave pop culture scholar to unpack here, but for the sake of brevity, I'll just pick out a few highlights;

i) Mel, the aging, cigar-chewing, Sam Fuller-esque New York-accented owner of the whole joint. What a character. I'd love to see a prequel outlining the unlikely circumstances which led to this guy running *a fuckin' summer camp*, as opposed to a pool hall, or a small left-wing publishing house. Did he win it in a poker game or something? His wardrobe choices are extraordinarily

misguided throughout, and the rocky emotional journey the poor guy goes on over the course of the film is perhaps the most tragic / affecting thing about it.

ii) Kids swearing! Always a welcome addition to movies, and the extended stream of abuse which the sort-of hero/Angela's cousin character dishes out at one point had me in hysterics.

iii) If you've read anything at all about this movie, the twist will probably have already been spoiled for you in advance, but nonetheless, it still remains to be said - *what a fuckin' ending*.

Depending on your perspective, you could probably make a case for 'Sleepaway Camp' as a unique piece of outsider art, as an insurgent masterwork of queer cinema subversion, or just as some kind of spectacular, never-to-be-repeated celluloid brain-wrong.

Personally though, I'm just seeing it in the rear view mirror, because it adds little to the kind of pre-Halloween atmosphere I'm trying to conjure through this month…

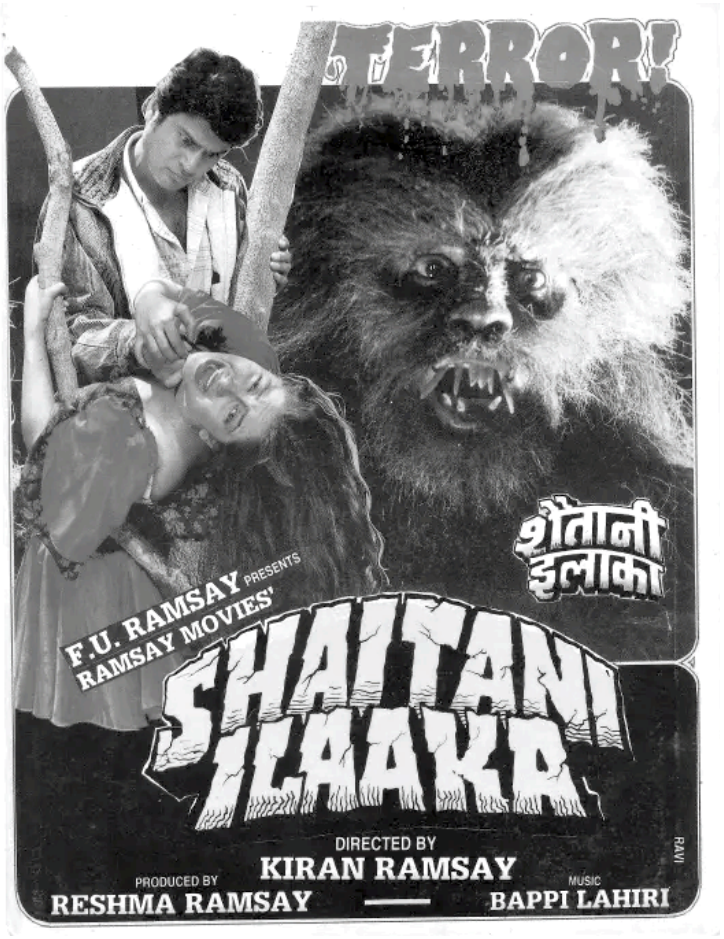
18/10/25 (Sat)

#22
Shaitani Ilaaka
(Kiran Ramsay, India, 1990)

Word on the street (and yes, I frequently discuss the merits of Bollywood horror films on the street, how about you?) has always been that the two films directed by Kiran Ramsay towards the end of the Ramsay Brothers' run in the early '90s are lesser efforts, in comparison to the work of older siblings Shyam & Tulsi. I've got to say though, I thought this one absolutely ruled.

The movie's opening stretch is pretty much relentless horror-blasting madness, as we open with a red-eyed, red-caped devil priestess kidnapping a virgin bride and transporting her - via horse-drawn coach - to an elaborate, fog-drenched forest altar, where stone-masked cultists dance around and gnarly monster hands reach upward from the ground, as the unfortunate victim is prepared for sacrifice to a huge, manky looking old bat idol. Wow.

Meanwhile, back in town, in the kind of well-appointed urban homestead featured in all Ramsay Bros films, a wealthy family's daughter finds herself plagued by terrifying dreams and telekinetic phenomena. This is a direct consequence no doubt of the fact that the family's live-in maid / au pair is in fact the bloody-eyed, uber-goth devil priestess from the preceding scene, who spends her off-duty hours conducting black magickal rites in her bedroom and swearing vengeance against her employers - a vengeance swiftly enacted when she uses demonic powers to orchestrate the death of the family patriarch.



Zip forward a decade or so, and the family's be-devilled daughter has come of age and obtained a selfless, heroic boyfriend (Ramsays regular Deepak Parashar). Devil Priestess Maid is still busy fucking shit up from her lair in the spare bedroom however, so, prior to the daughter's wedding, her mother calls in a formidable Tantrik Baba type fellow from Tibet to nix the bad vibes and generally take care of business. Predictably, a further tirade of shrieking, screaming, lightning blasting madness ensues, culminating in the Devil Au Pair transforming into a charred-flesh monster and murdering the mother, before trying to take down the daughter & her fiancée in a chaotic, swimming pool-based brawl before fleeing the scene.

Forty minutes in at this point, and, in proudest Hindi Horror tradition, 'Shaitani Ilaaka' has certainly offered no mercy to headache sufferers, with the blown out mono soundtrack delivering a near constant barrage of screaming, roaring, overdriven music, thunder crashes, whip-cracks and blasts of undifferentiated feedback, which continues across the majority of the remaining run-time.

So, Tantrik Baba declares that Deepak should take his bride to a "chaste ladies refuge" to escape the evil pursuing her - which potentially doesn't sound like much fun, but fear not, as we cut straight to a tourist bus winding its way through mountain roads, occupied by the usual Ramsays gang of happy, horny youthful characters, clad as usual in an extraordinary range of late '80s leisure-wear, and, just as inevitably, assisted in their happy-go-lucky antics by the

comic stylings of the ubiquitous Jagdeep aka Satish Shah.

From hereon in, we're locked into the standard Ramsay Bros mixture of music, romance, comedy and blood-curdling horror - and, as you will have noted by the fact I've been saying "Ramsays this" and "Ramsays that" in every paragraph thus far, Kiran proves to be very much a chip off the old block vis-a-vis his fealty to the established family formula. Which is a-ok by me, given that I consider this formula is one of best blueprints for entertaining human beings ever devised, but it does make the resulting films quite difficult to review, given that they're all basically pretty much the same.

A few unique wrinkles here though include a 'Race With The Devil'-styled sequence in which the occupants of the bus need to contend with a mass of angry, hooded cultists clinging to their vehicle, and a memorable confrontation between Tantrik Baba and the demonic witch Lal Bai, which involves the antagonists magically transforming each other's faces into masses of pustulating gore, perhaps reflecting the influence of '80s Hong Kong horror.

Meanwhile, that "chaste ladies refuge" mentioned earlier turns out to be a gel-lit shrine to Kali, and, when the movie's final boss monster eventually turns up, he resembles a gigantic, 'roided up, Yeti-like descendent of the snaggle-toothed werewolf-beast from 1979s 'Jaani Dushman', who trashes an entire village set(!) before eventually meeting his match via the business end of Kali's sacred trident. Again, what to say, except - wow.

And, an underrated entry in the Bollywood horror canon for sure, if I'm any judge. I can only assume the various "meh" reviews 'Shaitani Ilaaka' has attracted over the years simply reflects the fact that, for domestic viewers, the Ramsays' formula felt pretty played out & exhausted by the time the '90s hit. Thirty plus years down the line however, I could care less - this stuff makes me incredibly happy, and, so long as I leave a decent amount of time between movies to stop them all blurring into one, I'm always here for some more of it.

19/10/25 (Sun)

 # 23
The Ghost of Kagami Pond [Kaidan Kagami-ga-fuchi]
(Masaki Môri, Japan, 1959)

A standard issue, low budget Shintoho programmer barely scraping 60 minutes, this is about as straight-down-the-line as black & white-era *kaidan* pictures get, re-hashing the same old Yatsuya Kaidan-derived 'vengeful ghost of murdered wife' routine for (quite literally) the thousandth time in Japan's popular culture.

Such is the overall high standard of artistry within B&W *kaidan* pictures though, even this very minor example of the form still manages to deliver some properly eerie, atmospheric moments and a few powerful images here and there.

Sadly though, it does rather flub the obligatory cathartic ending, falling back on some hastily thrown together super-impositions and smoke, in lieu of the shots of the vengeful murder victims rising from their watery graves which the script (and most likely the contemporary audience) clearly demanded.

#24
The Return of Doctor X
(Vincent Sherman, USA, 1939)

Given how much I love 1932's 'Doctor X' *[see movie # 5 above]*, I thought it was about time I finally checked in with this loose sequel, which I'd never previously seen - although, I have on several occasions read Humphrey Bogart's memorable complaints about how much he hated being forced to appearance in it by Jack Warner.

Clearly, 'Return of..' has very little in common with its predecessor. No cast or crew cross over at all insofar as I can tell, and there's precious little narrative connection either, aside from the fact that both films feature (entirely different) characters named Dr. Xavier, both use wise-cracking reporters as protagonists, and, whilst the original 'Doctor X' gave us the concept of "synthetic flesh", the mad science here instead concerns "artificial blood".

And, it's equally clear that the whole ball-game re: Hollywood horror movies had changed hugely in the seven intervening years. The audacious, envelope-pushing pre-code mayhem epitomised by the likes of 'Doctor X' had long been consigned to the trash by this point, and the move toward cheaper, blander and more predictable B pictures was already well underway, even prior to the USA's entry into WWII.

Thankfully though, 'The Return of Doctor X' is at least one of the best 60 minute shockers this transitory period had to offer. Although not remotely in the same league as its predecessor, it's still all snappy, fast-moving, moderately weird business, and veteran director Sherman keeps things rattling along with pretty much zero down-time/dead air; it feels very much like one of the era's wild shudder-pulp magazine story of the era (albeit with some of the gory details rubbed out to appease the Code people.)

In fairness to Bogie vis-a-vis his high profile griping, he *is* horrendously miscast here, treading a thin line between uncanny and absurd as a pallid, skunk-haired mad doctor. The role initially seems like more of a Dwight Frye 'cringing henchman' type proposition, but as he gradually emerges as the main antagonist during the second half of the film, it's interesting to speculate what horror pros Karloff or

Lugosi might have done with this part. Doubtless they'd have made an effort to imbue the character with a degree of empathy / tragedy, whereas the sour, white-faced Bogart just plays him as a slimy creepazoid, practically counting down the seconds until he can duck out of shot, get that stupid fuckin' make up off and have a drink.

Bogie and a bunny: 'The Return of Doctor X'

20/10/25 (Mon)

#25
El Ataud Vampiro [The Vampire's Coffin]
(Fernando Mendez, Mexico, 1958)

Actors German Robles, Abel Salazar and Ariadna Welter all reprise their roles in this hastily knocked together sequel to 'El Vampiro' *[see movie # 16 above]*. Despite the sense of narrative continuity this provides however, it soon becomes evident that this one is going to be a very different proposition from its predecessor.

After a pleasingly foggy opening in which the titular coffin is snatched from its solemn resting place by a Morpho-esque boggle-eyed thug (great performance from one Yerye Beirute) under the supervision of a crooked colleague of Salazar's doctor character, the doom-laden gothic atmos of the first film is swiftly abandoned, as we're rudely thrown into a far more urban, science-orientated environment.

The tone is lighter, pulpier and more juvenile, leavened by some unwelcome comedy bumbling from Salazar, meaning that, initially at least, the movie doesn't offer much justification for its existence, as early scenes staged on blank-walled hospital sets soon threaten to become quite dull.

Stay tuned however, because this is still a Cinematográfica ABSA production, meaning that craftsmanship and technical chops (photography, direction, production design, music) remain top notch, and the film really picks up steam as it goes along, introducing some exciting new locations for Robles' revitalised bloodsucker to rampage around in (a subterranean wax museum, a follies-esque musical theatre), and working through a few brilliantly executed horror set-pieces. (Most notably, a great bit in which The Count spies on a woman in a Hopper-esque diner and stalks her through the nocturnal streets in full-on expressionist mode.)

There are a few moments of surprising brutality along the way (at one point the vampire sucks the blood of a child, whilst the elderly matriarch from the first movie gets killed in an iron maiden), and the final twenty minutes or so becomes an all-action extravaganza, matching the bombast of Gustavo Carrión's blaring, OTT score as Salazar mans up for an extended, life or death struggle with Robles' shape-shifting, teleporting arch-fiend, set amongst the dummies and torture instruments of the aforementioned museum. Meanwhile, prone leading lady Welter finds herself a hair's breadth away from being decapitated by a guillotine.

Once again, the extensive use of rubber bats proves a bit unfortunate (particularly the rubber mouse-like squeaking noises they've been assigned by the dubbing team), but nonetheless, we can chalk this one up as yet another certified banger from the boys at ABSA; fantastic stuff.

21/10/25 (Tues)

#26
The Soul of a Monster
(Will Jason, USA, 1944)

Another obscure Columbia programmer, this originally went out on a double-bill with 'Cry of the Werewolf' *[see # 6 above]* - which must have proved a singularly frustrating night at the pictures for '40s monster kids, given the that film's aforementioned lack of werewolves is matched by the total absence of monsters in this talky, self-important attempt to hitch a ride on the coattails of Val Lewton's RKO movies. For all its flaws though, 'Soul of a Monster' still proves a far more intriguing prospect than its dismal co-feature.

Crucially, the filmmakers here seem to have realised that what made the Lewton films so successful wasn't their subject matter, so much as their ability to present viewers with something *different*, and to credit their audience with some intelligence. So, instead of just making another rip-off movie about a wolf-woman or a cat-man or whatever, scriptwriter Edward Dein put in a bit of effort, and came up with a premise which splits the difference between 'highly original' and 'flat out goofy'.

Proceedings begin with a widely beloved philanthropist surgeon about to expire on his death-bed, having succumbed to an infection. Along with his grief-stricken young wife, he is attended in his final hours by his devoted hound, and by his two best friends - a priest and a fellow

doctor - who both look on helplessly, as the distraught wife begs them for a miracle. Science and God having seemingly both failed her, she turns to the roaring fireplace and decides instead to call upon the Powers of Darkness to save her husband's life. And, to the surprise of all concerned, this call is promptly answered by '40s horror regular Rose Hobart - a perfect (and apparently indestructible) 1940s spider-woman complete with an extraordinary, horn-like hair-do who purposefully glides through the dark night to knock upon the ailing doctor's chamber door.

After spending some time alone with this mysterious Satanic emissary, our surgeon finds himself suddenly feeling a whole lot better… but, wouldn't you know it, somehow the process of recovery has transformed the previously mild and selfless doc into a sneering, argumentative, dog-strangling asshole with no pulse. Always the way with these 'resurrected by the forces of evil' deals, isn't it..?

As intermittently inspired as Dein's script is though, the film's insistence on framing everything in terms of Christian dualism soon becomes tedious, as indeed does the unbearably smug priest character who soon emerges as our 'hero'. Prone to dispensing frowning gobbets of theological "wisdom" at every opportunity, at one point we're even forced us to bear witness as fellow conducts a choir of local orphans singing 'Ave Maria'. Satan preserve us!

In fact, the film's laboured attempts to insert some kind of 'serious' message into its frankly loopy storyline ultimately render it rather pretentious, its initial promise finally pole-axed by an abrupt ending which makes a mockery of all the high-falutin' altar-gazing which has proceeded it.

On the plus side though, it all *looks* amazing, largely thanks to the efforts of celebrated DP Burnett Guffey, who does exceptional work here as per usual, helping to create an even more stylised, expressionistic version of the alienated, urban hinterland conjured up by Nicholas Musuraca for 'Cat People' and 'The Seventh Victim'.

Hard shadows every which way, dutch angles and vertiginous high / low shots, shiny, eerily smooth faces emerging from the darkness… and above all, Hobart looks fantastic, stalking the streets in a figure-hugging black gown as she casually defies death by swinging electrical cable and screeching automobile.

Indeed, the metaphysical noir-type atmos here is so strong here, if you can tune out all the blathering dialogue and just groove on the images, there's a pretty fantastic hour's viewing to be enjoyed here. Though not altogether successful in what it's trying to do achieve, it's the kind of picture which can best be appreciated a great mood-setter; a smoking, infernal aperitif to be knocked back in preparation for watching an actual *good* black & white horror movie, perhaps?

22/10/26 (Weds)

#27
Vampira
(George Moorse, West Germany [TV], 1971)

I always like to find time to watch an oddball '70s TV documentary during my October horror marathons, and this year, John Coulthart's *{ feuilleton }* blog hipped me to this one, broadcast in West Germany in 1971.

Admittedly, calling this a 'documentary' is quite a stretch, but it does at least begin with a learned looking fellow surrounded by vertiginous piles of books, holding forth for a few minutes about "ein vampir".

His narration leads us into a series of what I can only describe as silent, Rollin-esque vignettes, in which a number of heavily made up vampiric characters enact strange and mystifying dramas, accompanied by an original score from Tangerine Dream.

There's a heavy psychedelic / post-hippie ambience hanging over everything (at one point a shadowy figure walks past street signs reading 'Rue Janis Joplin' and 'Rue Jimi Hendrix'), and basically I had no idea what was going on at any point - a situation which I suspect would remain unchanged even if I had a fluent grasp of the German language.

The presence of a striking black woman with closely cropped hair and long finger nails - resembling Jacqueline Sieger's memorable personification of The Queen of the Vampires in Jean Rollin's 'Le Viol de Vampire' (1968) - makes me wonder to what extent Rollin's early work was a conscious influence on director George Moorse here, but for the most part, proceedings are more abstract than anything Rollin ever shot, perhaps veering closer to the American Avant Garde (eg, Steven Arnold's 'Luminous Procuress' (1971) and that sort of thing.)

Oh, and there is some goat kissing at one point too.

According to Coulthart, George Moorse went on to make some Lovecraft adaptations for German TV. Now those I would like to see!

('Vampira' is available to view & download via archive.org.)

Assorted weirdness from George Moorse's 'Vampira'.

#28
Blood of The Vampire
(Henry Cass, UK, 1958)

As one of the more infamous early attempts to cash in on the success of Hammer's gothic horrors, I was expecting this to be a hoary old business, and I suppose it is really; but it's a hell of a lot of fun too, which proved a nice surprise.

I love the shamelessness with which producers (Robert S.) Baker & (Monty) Berman were biting Hammer's style here. Frankenstein cleaning up at the box office? Right, let's get the guy who wrote their script and make a mad scientist movie! What's that, they're shooting Dracula next week? Ok, tell him to make the mad scientist a vampire, how 'bout that?

You'd have to say though that this is one of the more convincing contemporary imitations of Hammer's lavishly ghoulish Technicolor aesthetic - just with any hint of class or sophistication jettisoned in favour of relentless grand guignol sadism.

I'm unfamiliar with the film's censorship history, but with stabbings, stakings, impalements, a gun-shot wound to the face, beating hearts in jars, dog attacks, despairing torture victims groaning in pain, steaming heaps of offal hanging around all over the place and a disfigured hunchback leering at chained up 'buxom beauties'… well, let's just say I'm amazed the British censors let this bloody thing get anywhere near a screen in 1958, even with cuts.

Jimmy Sangster's script shares a lot of DNA with 'The Revenge of Frankenstein' (which he wrote for Hammer the following year), but the "mad doctor takes care of business in a corrupt prison" premise explored here also popped up again in 'Frankenstein and The Monster from Hell' over 15 years down the line, so it's probably fair to say that the pendulum of influence swung both ways here. And, call me crazy, but… could the opening scene here, in which a black masked executioner uses a big wooden mallet to ceremonially whack a stake into Donald Wolfit's chest, have caught the eye of Mario Bava, vis-a-vis 'Black Sunday' two years later…? Just putting that out there.

Though I'm sure Wolfit was a fine theatrical belter in his day, I fear he makes the rookie error here of playing the nefarious Dr Callistratus (sounds painful) as a cold, selfish bully, failing to realise that we always need our horror movie villains to be at least *a bit* charming, rather than just repellent and mean.

Most of the younger male cast members meanwhile just spend their time flexing and declaiming as if they were in a pirate movie, but it must be said that Barbara Shelley is absolutely radiant here as the movie's oft-overlooked heroine - a powerful presence and no mistake. As per usual for female characters in Sangster-scripted movies though, I wish she'd been given something to do.

Such flaws though are probably to be expected in the midst of what is essentially a massively over-stuffed grab-bag of gory pulp horror cliché as it existed circa the late '50s, mixed up with a generous dose of prison movie and seasoned with a dash of poorly choreographed swashbuckling, all served up with perfect technical competency but zero pretence toward 'style' or 'artistry'. So, a pretty great time in other words.

23/10/25 (Thurs)

#29
Night of the Damned ['La Notte dei Dannati']
(Filippo Walter Ratti, Italy, 1971)

Having only previously experienced this notable entry in the early '70s Erotic Castle Movie cycle via a distant and barely remembered late night attempt to watch a VHS-derived bootleg, it's probably fair to say that returning to it via Severin's 4K restoration, running nearly 20 minutes longer than previously extant versions, pretty much constitutes a first watch.

And… well, this is certainly not a film for everyone, that's for sure. In fact, cynics may claim it's not really a film for *anyone*, given that it's absurd, sloppy, incoherent and excruciatingly tedious, but what can I tell you? I loved every minute of it.

Fair warning is given however that even seasoned Euro-Horror veterans may find themselves frustrated by the way the film constantly cuts short the obligatory scenes of erotic delirium to return to our dogged hero painstakingly investigating a series of utterly irrelevant 'mysteries'. I mean, it's as if Renato Polselli had spent 45 minutes of 'Black Magic Rites' concentrating on some pipe-smoking tosser conferring with the police and undertaking research in the library, slowly piecing together the terrible truth that - shock! - there's a resurrected witch and some black magic shit going down in this here castle. *Not needed.*

Likewise, with the exception of some fantastic shots of Head Witch Angela De Leo seated upon her throne wreathed in scarlet smoke during the infernal depredations, it's fair to say that 'La Notte dei Dannati' adds little in the way of distinctive or memorable imagery to the ECM canon. And, even worse, it now transpires that the long-supressed sapphic sex scenes might well have been snipped from prints simply because they're so boring and poorly shot, rather than due to any censorship concerns.

But, I don't care. I even loved all of that stuff.

There is a very particular scent of scuzzed out, k-hole euro-trash / witch-smut derangement here, so rich that I can practically smell it on every frame. Like a dusty old leather-bound book, full of obscene promise… who cares what it's actually *about?*

It takes me right back to when I was first discovering this kind of cinema, heading down to Leicester market during my lunch hour, perusing the stall where this creepy old lady used to sell Redemption videos for £4 a pop, picking one pretty much at random for my Friday night entertainment. Then later, sitting back with my glass of cheap red in my attic room, pushing the tape into the player, with NO IDEA what was about to happen.

Sometimes, I got 'Deep Red', or 'Lisa and the Devil'. Sometimes, I was stuck with 'The Bloodsucker Leads The Dance', 'Oasis of the Zombies', or…. something very much like 'Night of the Damned'. Either way though, I was happy, lost in a fog of delirious oblivion, no idea where these things emanated from, who the hell made them, or what sleepy-eyed, hallucinatory wonders I might be confronted with next.

Now, half a lifetime later, I've read a mountain of guff about Italian and Spanish horror movies, and know every damned thing about them. As a result, I often miss the naïve wonder of those early days - but for a hundred minutes or so this evening, watching 'Night of the Damned' brought it all back.

24/10/25 (Fri)

#30
Basket Case
(Frank Henenlotter, USA, 1982)

Another film that I've not re-visited in way too long.

When I first watched 'Basket Case' way back when, I probably didn't appreciate the extent to which Henenlotter was expanding on the blueprint laid down by Corman in 'A Bucket of Blood' and 'Little Shop of Horrors'. But to take that formula and mix it up with 'Of Mice and Men' level human tragedy, 'Martin'-esque alienation, gloriously wild lo-fi monster FX and gore… and to still keep things funny as hell, right through to the closing scenes..?

To keep those elements spinning in perfect balance is an astounding achievement for a first time / DIY filmmaker. Whatever one might make of Henenlotter's later films, it's difficult not be left in awe of the extraordinary thing he created here, and of the talent and dedication required to bring it to fruition with such minimal resources.

A big part of the success of Henenlotter's films I think, is that they're always so well cast. He has a gift for making movies without a single recognisable name in the cast, but in which every single actor is brilliant; just *perfect* for the role they're playing. Where does he find these people? New York, I suppose, is the answer. What a vast sieve of unrecognised/unfulfilled thespian potential that city was (and to some extent presumably still is.)

Anyway, 'Basket Case' is pretty much as good as low budget horror gets, as I'm sure the majority of those reading this will already be well aware, so there's little more for me to add.

#31
Necronomicon: Book of the Dead
(Christophe Gans / Shûsuke Kaneko / Brian Yuzna, France/Japan/USA, 1993)

Hurrah - in spite of everything, I've made it to 31 movies early.

As a self-styled scholar of Lovecraftian cinema, I suppose I should have plenty to say about this Brian Yuzna-produced anthology movie, but to be honest, picking it apart in detail feels like an exhausting prospect, so I'll try to keep things comparatively brief.

First off, it's nice to see Jeffrey Combs (complete with rubber chin) playing Lovecraft in the wrap-around narrative, albeit a rather more twinkly-eyed and mischievous personification of the renowned misanthropic racist than really feels appropriate. And, I also liked the way the movie presents the Necronomicon itself as an unspeakably rare and fearful volume, capable of warping time and space by its mere presence… an approach to the mythos which I've always favoured to that in which every nutcase on the Eastern Seaboard seems to have a copy or two stashed down the back of their sofa.

Less welcome however is the curious notion that the antediluvian ravings of The Mad Arab seem to have inspired Lovecraft to scribble down a series a story ideas which are clearly set in the 1990s… but, we'll get on to that.

First story, 'The Drowning', directed by Christophe Gans ('Brotherhood of the Wolf', etc), seems to be very, very, *very* loosely based on the 1919 story 'Dagon', and proves a right old mess in narrative terms, never really establishing anything or going anywhere. There are some decent, gloopy tentacle-y effects though, the sets and design cast a welcome nod in the direction of the Corman/Poe films, and it's nice to hear Richard Lynch recite the famed "that which is not dead…" epigram during a flashback sequence.

Because I'm a pedant about these things, it bothered me though that reading the Necronomicon inspires the central character to draw a Seal of Solomon-esque pentangle on his floor, given that you'd assume that such familiar, western magic(k)al traditions are precisely what you would

NOT find amid the pre-human revelations imparted by Alhazred. But, I'm also aware that I should avoid getting annoyed by such peripheral details in the context of a movie like this.

Second story, directed by Shûsuke Kaneko, is a comparatively faithful take on 1926's 'Cool Air' - an atypical Lovecraft story which I've never been very keen on, so I won't get precious about it. (Good to know though that the Necronomicon also gives us the low-down on early air-conditioning units and the surgical extraction of spinal fluid.)

Unfortunately, this segment gets a bit ponderous, but photography and production design are again very nice, and it benefits hugely from the presence of the late David Warner, heroically imbuing passages of clunky / absurd dialogue with real grace and gravitas, like the old pro he was. Nice to see Millie Perkins from 'The Witch Who Came From The Sea' (1976) popping up briefly too, although I confess I didn't clock her presence until the closing credits clued me in.

Based, as far as I can tell, on no Lovecraft story whatsoever, our final episode, Brian Yuzna's 'The Butcher', proves by far the most entertaining. Touching on such quintessential Lovecraftian themes as motherhood, buddy-cop relationships and car chases, this outburst of cinematic mayhem involves the exploration of ancient, pre-Columbian catacombs located beneath, uh, Philadelphia (?!), which turn out to occupied by bone-marrow drinking, fetus-stealing, vagina-mouthed bat-aliens. Essentially a thin excuse for an unhinged special effects rampage, it's all carried off in finest latex-blasting, gore-vomiting Yuzna style, which is fine by me.

In fact, despite the nominal presence of the other two directors, this whole movie has Yuzna's fingerprints all over it, for better or for worse. OTT effects, screaming insanity and orchestral bombast are the order of the day, whilst plotting remains sketchy in the extreme, leaving narrative threads to collapse into mulch, and meaning that none of the episodes really achieve the kind of cyclical / ironic, twist-in-the-tail structure required to make such anthology segments either meaningful or effective.

So - a bit of a mixed bag really. There's definitely enough good stuff here to make it worth a watch, with effects, performances and production design all hitting a remarkably high bar for what I'm assuming must have been a fairly low budget production. But at the same time, it's all so ramshackle, under-written and poorly thought out that it never really coheres into a satisfying whole. A shame.

25/10/25 (Sat)

#32
Psychomania
(Don Sharp, UK, 1973)

AKA The Death Wheelers

Despite the fact that I count 'Psychomania' as one of my favourite films of all-time, this was the first time I've ever watched it in a HD presentation.

I suppose that, after travelling the land for years with a trusty recorded-off-TV VHS in my knapsack, forcing everyone I met to watch it, then upgrading at some point to a DVD, and forcing everyone to watch that, I eventually reached the point where I had seen 'Psychomania' enough.

I eventually bought the blu-ray on sale though, mainly just so that I'd be covered if/when it went out of print, and buying necessitates watching, so - here we are again. And verily, the most recent release does indeed represent a considerable jump in picture quality, complete with a whole new extra feature dedicated to outlining the painstakingly convoluted restoration process involved in returning the vivid scarlet hue to Jane Pettibone's biking leathers.

At this stage though, watching 'Psychomania' is more of a totemic / ceremonial activity for me than anything else. Perhaps it's just a reflection of the time, place and cultural landscape in which I was raised, but for me, this film is a thing of perpetual wonder and joy, beyond criticism. The world in which 'Psychomania' takes place is the world in which I want to live in, basically. (Well, assuming 'Danger: Diabolik' is unavailable, at least.)

What fascinates me most about the film these days, is its status as a unique creative artefact which just seems to have just emerged organically from the weird cultural melting pot of Britain in the early 1970s, with no guiding intelligence behind it at all, no single creative vision ushering it into existence.

The producers acquired some funding to mount a cheap horror movie at short notice, and pulled an unfilmed script out of their bottom drawer. The director was a jobbing action/thriller guy, more at home doing Alistair MacLean movies and episodic TV. Most of the younger cast were theatrical / TV actors who just treated it as a piece of junk that would be forgotten in a few weeks, whilst contemporary reports suggest that their esteemed co-stars George Sanders and Beryl Reid could (understandably) barely make it through a take without collapsing into laughter.

Scotties
Scotties
Scotties

fevered gusto by an unusually engaged Freddie Francis.

I could continue reeling off all the individual elements of this production which are GOOD indefinitely, but it scarcely seems necessary. Every aspect of 'The Creeping Flesh' is good. Although it's not the kind of movie twhich is ever going to blow anyone's mind with its wild, artistic genius, it's not designed to be. Instead, best to see it as the work of a group of craftspeople and technicians who had been toiling away on this kind of film for decades, proceeding about their business in "well oiled machine" type fashion, and taking advantage of the opportunity to produce a better picture than anyone had a right to expect at this stage in the game.

And, it's all the better for the fact that's there's no self-referential, "remember the good old days" nostalgia fogging up the lens here either. Everyone plays it completely straight, channelling their efforts into just making the damned thing GOOD. Mission accomplished, and I daresay large glasses of brandy back at the hotel bar felt thoroughly earned, perhaps for the last time.

26/10/25 (Sun)

#34
Help Me... I'm Possessed!
(Charles Nizet, USA, 1974)

One of the more obscure figures lurking on the fringes of '70s drive-in / grindhouse cinema, Las Vegas wildman Charles Nizet has seen his profile boosted ever-so-slightly in recent years following the rediscovery of his previously lost magnum opus 'Voodoo Heartbeat' aka 'The Sex Serum of Dr. Blake'. An extraordinary work of demented outsider sleaze, that film caused the droppage of many jaws (my own included) when it was returned to public view via the auspices of Vinegar Syndrome's 'Lost Picture Show' box set - and I'm happy to report that Nizet's other signature work in the horror field proves equally, uh…. *notable*, is perhaps the word I'm looking for.

In technical terms, we're about on the level of an Al Adamson movie here, so consider yourself forewarned. Nizet's filmmaking chops have perhaps improved *slightly* since '..Dr Blake' though, and his editing has picked up the pace a bit too (so, no sixty second shots of policemen descending ladders to contend with here.) More importantly however, his twisted vision proves vastly more entertaining than anything Adamson ever shot, so - let's dive in.

In a plasterboard castle out in "the desert", slobbish bully Dr Blackwood purports to operate a sanatorium for "the emotionally disturbed". Behind closed doors though, you'll be unsurprised to learn that the good doc seems more than a little disturbed himself, what with the pressures of simultaneously being both an ideologically driven mad scientist and a sadistic religious zealot... which seems like a difficult balance to maintain, philosophically speaking, but whatcha gonna do?

Anyway, Dr Blackwood has little time for philosophy, given that his gaff is populated by enough stereotypical drooling loonies, pervy hunchbacks and lumbering mutes to make Andy Milligan blow a gasket - and that's even before we get a glimpse of the secret underground lair where he keeps some of his less wholesome specimens. Locked in cages, these unfortunates howl and shriek ceaselessly, forced to bear witness as a succession of semi-naked women are chained to the ceiling, molested and generally mistreated, all for the fulfilment of the doctor's perverted lusts, or whatever.

In one especially memorable outburst of rank misogyny, a female inmate is shut in a coffin with a poisonous snake for the crime of allegedly "provoking" the male patients, whilst some poor psycho meanwhile gets his head lopped off by the guillotine which takes pride of place in the doctor's torture chamber.

More intriguingly however, the doctor's young, mentally handicapped sister (?!) has become "best friends" with what appears to be a shapeless, tentacled monster, represented on screen by surrealistic cut-away shots of a mass of writhing, red-tinted spaghetti. This inexplicable thing roars like the MGM lion, and rampages around at night bloodily tearing people to pieces. ("It's just some sense of evil which wandered into the desert...," Dr Blackwood helpfully explains.)

It's little things like this which cause the local sheriff to start sticking his oar into Blackwood's high-minded scientific business, incurring the doctor's wrath by, you know, *asking questions* and stuff like that, prompting an epic battle of wills between the two slovenly, overweight alpha males which can only end in disaster, with Blackwood's heretofore unmentioned frumpy, mini-dress clad wife caught in the cross-fire.

Stunningly awful, utterly mindless and offensive beyond belief though all this may be, it's difficult not to admire Nizet's cracked, unheimlich imagination on at least some level, along with the "throw everything at the wall and see what sticks" approach to the horror genre he applies here. In the final analysis, I'm not sure very much of it sticks, but at a brisk 73 minutes, well - to invoke the hallowed words which have ended a million lukewarm online movie reviews, *it's certainly never dull.*

Nobody in this film is possessed by anything, at any point, incidentally.

WHEN THE FORCES OF
EVIL INFUSE YOUR BODY
WILL YOU SCREAM OUT...
HELP ME...
I'M POSSESSED!
FANTASTIC... SHOCKING SPECTACLE
INTO THE REALM OF THE MACABRE
BILL GREER DEEDY PETERS LYNN MARTA
IN BLAZING COLOR
Written by WILLIAM GREER Directed by CHARLES NIZET Produced by SI DeBARDAS A WILL ZENS presentation

Yes, this is the actual theatrical poster for 'Help Me… I'm Possessed!'

27/10/25 (Mon)

#35
Attack of the Beast Creatures
(Michael Stanley, USA, 1985)

AKA Hell Island

A 1920s-set stowaways-marooned-on-a-desert-island saga filmed in assorted parks around Connecticut, this would be a pretty terrible film in all respects, were it not for the Beast Creatures. The Beast Creatures are adorable.

In fact, if you're unfamiliar with this film, I'm recommend finding a way to cue it up for viewing cold, without looking at any posters, reviews or promotional materials (and I'll play along by not reproducing any here). That way it will all be a wonderful surprise.
Just wait for the Beast Creatures, and trust me - they will make trudging through all that poorly acted, poorly photographed "desert island" business suddenly seem worthwhile.

That one shot we see of the Beast Creatures worshipping the idol of their strange God? Incredible. The bit where one of them scurries straight down a tree branch and takes a flying leap at somebody's neck? Superb.

Combine this with the sublime sense of WTF surrealism resulting the fact that no attempt whatsoever is made to provide a rationale for the Beast Creatures' existence or presence on the island, and… I'm sold. More than sold; I'm ecstatic.

In lesser hands, the same script could easily have been made into a worthless, depressing film about island castaways being menaced by, I dunno - rats or something. But no. Director / editor Michael Stanley and (deep breath) writer / cinematographer / editor / camera operator / monster designer / monster vocalist / matte painter / actor Robert A. Hutton demanded more. They knew their film needed BEAST CREATURES, and they made it happen. May the weird God of the Beast Creatures bless them.

28/10/25 (Tues)

#36
Eye Of The Devil
(J. Lee Thompson, UK/USA, 1966)

David Niven headlines this glossy, oft-overlooked Anglo-American occult thriller, playing a French aristocrat who returns from Paris to his ancestral country estate, there to lead the pagan cult to which his indentured workers belong in a ritual sacrifice to revive their ailing vineyards. Wouldn't you know it though, his meddling wife (Deborah Kerr) insists on turning up with the bloody kids in tow, thus causing no end of bother.

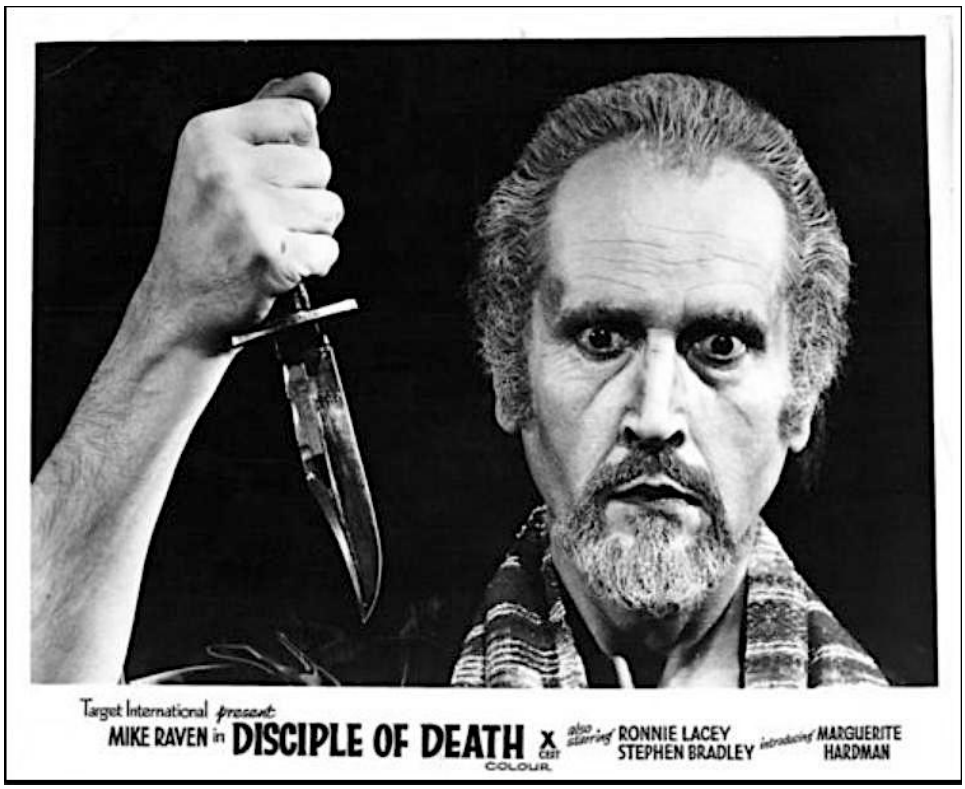
Though the film is set and shot in France, the entire cast is British, and it's a mighty impressive one at that. Donald Pleasence, Flora Robson, David Hemmings, John LeMesurier, Emlyn Williams… I could go on. Though not technically a studio film, a hefty chunk of the Hollywood dollars sloshing around London in the mid-'60s were clearly invested here. Grandly appointed sets and locations, high-end cars, sweeping, stylish crane-heavy photography - this is a slick affair and no mistake.

Thematically, it draws on the ever-popular 'gas-lighting psycho-thriller' end of the gothic tradition (shades of 'Rebecca' and all her descendants), but with significant supernatural / occult elements, pre-empting a number of suvsequent genre trends/lanfmarks which would emerge over the following decade. Most obviously, I'm guessing few readers will have made it through my opening paragraph without yelling, "'The Wicker Man'?!", but the hooded cultists stomping about in the woods at various points also reminded me of Norman J. Warren's 'Satan's Slave' (1975), which actually has quite a similar story structure, albeit rendered on a far smaller scale.

Above all though, I see a direct through-line here to the post-'Rosemary's Baby' craze for "Civilized Satanist" yarns which briefly took hold in the USA during the early '70s - an observation which becomes slightly eerie in view of the fact that 'Eye Of The Devil' also features none other than ("..and introducing..") Sharon Tate, looking immaculately witchy in what is probably her best screen role. (I may be misremembering, but didn't Polanski first meet her whilst she was working on this film..? Could it have been this which inspired him to adapt Ira Levin's book and do the whole thing better? Who knows…)

Interesting as it may be to speculate about all this though, it's a shame that the movie itself isn't actually much cop. In fact, it's ponderous as hell, feeling far longer than its 95 minute run-time as the script painstakingly tip-toes around a bunch of 'shock revelations' which have been utterly bloody obvious right from the outset.

Unsurprisingly in view of his wider career, J. Lee Thompson directs the damned thing like an action thriller minus the action, and, for all his fancy camerawork, rarely succeeds in summoning up much of an atmosphere, horrific or otherwise. Niven admittedly is very good in his role, and Tate and Hemmings both bring a great, menacing presence, adding a welcome 'generation gap' frisson to proceedings. But, I'm sorry to report that Kerr makes for a surprisingly unengaging gothic heroine, with her character spending much of her screen-time getting flustered and making a fuss to no very clear end, like a mildly outraged public school teacher. Which I'm aware is exactly what she did in 'The Innocents' just five years earlier, and that's one of the great classics of fantastic cinema, but… what can I tell you, this sure ain't.



29/10/25 (Weds)

#37
Disciple of Death
(Tom Parkinson, UK, 1972)

I recently found myself revisiting 'Crucible of Terror' (1971), the first of two British horror films designed to showcase the questionable talents of former DJ, sculptor and would-be horror star Mike Raven, and deemed it to be an enjoyable and under-rated British sort-of giallo. So, I thought it was probably about time I checked in with Raven's largely self-financed follow up… but oh my, this is a different kettle of fish entirely.

I'm aware that "scuzzy" is a word oft over-used in film reviews, but this is some high level scuzz right here. Admittedly, the low-res VHS-rip I watched probably didn't do it any favours, but 'Disciple of Death' gives the impression of having been shot on the mankiest 16mm stock imaginable, lending an ugly, artificial air to its painfully threadbare 18th century period setting - like a local amateur theatre production of 'Blood on Satan's Claw' or something.

The plot, when it finally emerges from amid the all grating regional accents, periwigs and knee-britches, is as simple as they come. The black-clad, pointy-bearded Mr Raven has pitched up in a remote farming community to claim ownership of the derelict "old hall" (which looks more like a large shed, but ok), and promptly begins murdering and enslaving the locals, recruiting some nearby "maidens" (including Louise Jameson, who went on to play Leela in Dr Who) to serve as the whey-faced zombies who assist him in performing his black magickal rites.

The sad truth is, Raven was never much of an actor, and whilst he just about scraped by in 'Crucible..', his performance here is staggeringly bad, making it easy to see why he became such a laughing stock amongst British horror fans in subsequent years. I don't want to belabour the point too much, but hearing him stumble his way through the overwrought dialogue assigned to him, mangling each sentence with Shatner-esque pauses, is simply excruciating. To his credit, at least he had the good grace to say 'nevermore' (sorry) and pack it in after this one.

Elsewhere, there's some poorly executed yet sadistic gore to get the punters in, but the film's overall highlight arrives at about the mid-point, with Raven's big black mass / sacrifice sequence. Playing out very much like one of the similarly bat-shit black magic scenes in Paul Naschy's early movies, this is a sheer delight, with the grungy video quality lending it all an extra edge of nastiness. How many Electric Wizard fan videos have popped up on youtube using this footage I wonder? The aesthetic is just dead on.

Sadly though, this only serves to remind me that 'Disciple of Death's soundtrack consists solely of a couple of over-familiar Bach pieces played on a church organ (yes, Tocatta and Fugue.. time again), which are repeated incessantly throughout the entire movie. Some groovy music could really have livened up these squares a bit, as you'd think Raven may have appreciated given his history broadcasting on pirate radio, but hey-ho.

Leading the fight back against Raven's Satanic emissary meanwhile, we find none other than Ronald Lacey, later of

'Raiders of the Lost Ark' fame, playing the local priest. (He's in 'Crucible..' too, so I assume he must have been a mate of Raven's?)

Lacey teams up with an ersatz Ralph Gower farm boy whose beloved has been shanghaied by Raven, and things take a very strange turn in the second half of the film, as the pair decide to seek guidance from, of all people, a 'Jewish Cabalist', who appears to live in a cave on a nearby hillside.

I certainly appreciate the film's attempt here to side-step the dreary Christian dualism which normally dominates this kind of thing, and our Cabalist certainly lays down a fascinating hodge-podge of alchemical / folkloric hoo-hah during his brief time on screen. But, he's also costumed like one of the Three Wise Men, and played as a dated 'comic turn' by veteran actor Nicholas Amer, which is… well, it's all a bit uncomfortable, let's leave it at that.

Meanwhile, Raven responds to this threat to his magickal dominance by calling upon the Spirits of the Four Elements to send him… a magic dwarf! (Rusty Goffe, who later popped up in 'Star Wars', 'Flash Gordon' and every other bloody franchise movie which ever needed a dwarf, it seems.)

There follows a spectacularly boring sequence in which Goffe hurls elemental spells at Lacey and his pal as they attempt to traverse a rugged section of the Cornish coastline. He only gets around to doing 'fire' and 'water' though, which is probably just as well, before just biting a chunk out of Lacey's throat, before Farm Boy defeats Raven and reclaims his zombified bride by waving what looks like a silver tobacco tin in his face.

Even after this, this bloody film refuses to end, but I feel this review definitely should, so… let's just say that 'Disciple of Death' was a rough watch, and is absolutely not recommended to anyone under any circumstances. At the same time though, it's so relentlessly, bloody-mindedly weird and cranky that I… well… I appreciate the fact that it exists, is perhaps a good way to put it.

30/10/25 (Thurs)

#38
The Beast With Five Fingers
(Robert Florey, USA, 1945)

Whilst it's difficult to say anything too negative about a film which centres around Peter Lorre battling a sentient severed hand, I do wish that the sixty or so minutes of screen-time here which do not feature Peter Lorre and/or the severed hand had something more to offer than just a whimsical, knowingly silly old-dark-house timewaster.

It's symptomatic I feel of how far American horror movies had fallen by the end of the war years, that you could take a dead cert premise like this, backed up by an extraordinary actor at the peak of his powers, a bunch of remarkably effective and clever effects wok, even a reasonable budget and a half-decent director... and then smother it all in gallons of blandly respectable, faintly embarrassed, arched eyebrow, "why, this is all a bit silly, isn't it folks - don't worry though, there'll be a proper movie along in a minute" type *guff*.

A decade earlier, this would have been an out of control rampage of a movie. As it is, I wish I could cut it down to a 15 minute highlights reel and save everybody some time.

31/10/26 (Fri)

A few classics to round off the big day…

#39
The Haunted Palace
(Roger Corman, USA, 1963)

It may not objectively be the best Corman/Poe film by any stretch of the imagination, but (along with '..Red Death'), this remains one my favourites.

Possibly this is due to the fact I'm a Lovecraft nut, but I also enjoy Floyd Crosby's exceptionally gloomy, almost monochrome, photography, the appropriately cyclopean scale of Daniel Haller's production design, and I'm always impressed by the extent to which the filmmakers succeeded in creating the geography and atmosphere of a fictional New England village out of absolutely nothing. Phenomenally good dual performance from Vincent here too. Always a pleasure.

And to complete our "movies which begin with a torch-wielding mob traversing swampy terrain to murder a suspected warlock in possession of a Lovecraftian grimoire, before a distant descendent inherits their derelict property generations later" double-bill, we have…

#40
The Beyond [L'aldilà]
(Lucio Fulci, Italy, 1981)

Just because.

I'm not enough of a nerd to keep up with the gratuitous Fulci merchandising industry too closely, but has there ever been a fan-fic spin-off, or novelisation chapter, or comic or something dedicated to Best Short-Lived Supporting Character Ever award-winner Joe The Plumber and his strange family life? I think I need one.

And with that, HAPPY HALLOWEEN EVERYBODY. Hope you had a good one. Thanks for reading, and I'll see you all again in October 2026…

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Thanks to everyone who bought, sold, read or said anything nice about the first two.

Feedback, corrections, suggestions, contributions, movie chat etc all welcomed at:
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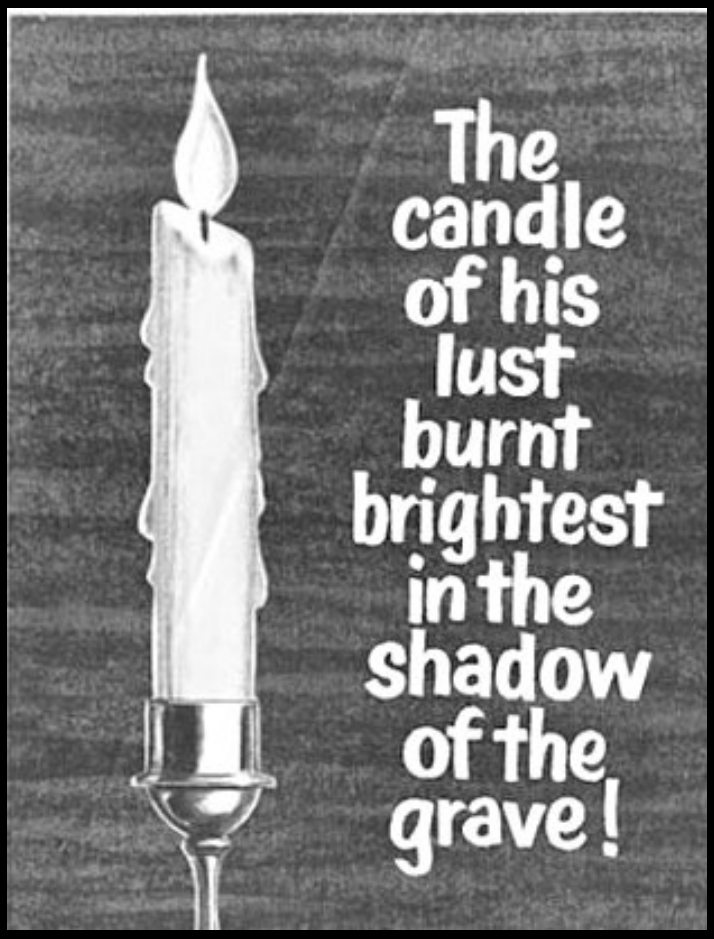

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